Be Relevant or Become a Relic
Meeting the Public Where They Are

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Loren Eisely once wrote, “Life is a series of shooting sparks— all the rest is interpretation.” Most readers who are scientists or resource managers know science is capable of measuring, describing, and explaining much if not all of Eisely’s shooting sparks. I agree with them. For the scientist, some truths exist. Sure, attaining certainty is not easy. Those who know science understand that data requires interpretation and that explanations are challenged, refined, and change with the passage of time. Yet science assumes that if verifiable questions are asked and appropriate tests conducted, unified explanations, laws, schemes, models, and theories regarding nature are possible.

In the 21st century, the resources we have been charged to protect and manage will come under increasing pressure. I used to think I wanted to be a superintendent. Not now. It’s an incredibly difficult job. A manager has so many people to answer to—so many perspectives to consider. Most of those stakeholders do not have the scientific literacy of most resource professionals. What’s more, scientific explanation holds little relevance or power for many, even when they comprehend. People understand, value, and order life and nature in an incredible variety of ways for just as incredible a variety of reasons. Regardless of whether science does or does not provide the best explanations of the physical world, its boundaries do not contain all, or even close to all, constructions of meaning.

Whether that is good or bad, or whether science provides access to the only truth, are not a questions I am willing to debate. I think, though, we can all agree that different perspectives and ways of finding meaning in the resource exist. I present a vision of the profession of interpretation as well as suggest a relationship between interpretation and resource management, because I believe that embracing the variety of meanings that audiences see in the resources we protect and manage is a critical strategy for preservation.

Interpretation is a budding profession. It is in the process of defining its purpose, standards, and language. One of the problems with interpretation so far has been that there have been too many interpretations of what interpretation is.

One caricature holds interpretation to be interpredata. A quick joke: Too often, asking an interpreter a question is like trying to take a drink of water from a firehose. All that pressure and volume can be overwhelming. Unfortunately, such an approach ignores the reality that scientists, historians, and anthropologists all use data to say something about their subject. Even more importantly, interpredata fails to help the audience make personal connections to the resource. All interpretation must be built upon accurate and comprehensive information, but if audiences were simply seeking knowledge, most would have little reason to experience the site at all.

Another outlook describes interpretation as interpretainment. This perspective is satisfied with a pleasant visitor experience and holds that interpretation is valuable only because it is entertaining. Certainly good interpretation needs to entertain and connect to audience interests, but interpretainment warps the concept and fails to connect the visitor to the resource. It places the resource in the same arena with Disneyland.

Interpreganda is another. The primary goal of interpreganda is to convince the audience of the singular validity of a particular ideological or agency perspective. Audiences often know when they are being told how to think and don't like it. Interpreganda is mostly effective for visitors that already share the articulated point of view. Interpreters need to say something significant about their places, but proselytizing can do a great deal of damage.

Finally there is interprecation. While education and interpretation are related and often overlap, there are significant differences between the two. Educational goals are usually directed at specific learning objectives. Formal education embraces, to varying degrees, testing and teacher accountability. Interpretation should support those goals. Partnerships with schools, Elder-hostels, scout, and church groups connect resources with institutions that have long-term influence over learning. However, interpretation can't be constrained by a test of knowledge at the end of a program. Learning happens in many ways outside the classroom and even outside the field trip. There must be more.

The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program has been in existence since 1995. It sets standards of excellence and provides learning resources that motivate and enable interpreters to create opportunities for the public to form their own meaningful connections with the resource. The Interpretive Development Program was created by more than 300 field interpreters and is comprised of a curriculum that supports professional development in 10 interpretive competencies, such as talks, tours, interpretive writing, educational programs, media, and planning. The Interpretive Development Program also has a functioning peer-review certification system for each of those competencies.

The Interpretive Development Program views the resources we work with as tangible places and things and also considers the intangible meanings those tangible resources represent. Intangible meanings include, among others: systems, processes, relationships, values, ideas, and beliefs. Tangible resources can be viewed as icons that focus and reveal intangible meanings or connect the observers to something larger than themselves. This is true for the resource as a whole, as well as for all its parts, flora and fauna, furniture, and landscape.

What is essential to understand here is that tangible resources have little value for an audience or potential constituency without their context of intangible meanings. Further, those meanings derive, for the audience, a specific power and relevance because of their association with the tangible thing. Tangible and intangible resources require a

connection or link to one another.

The Interpretive Development Program suggests that protecting and managing the tangible resource alone is not enough. Perhaps Tanaka Shozo, an eminent Japanese Conservationist who died in 1911, said it best:
"The care of rivers is not a question of rivers but of the human heart."
Shozo uses the word *care* to refer to the tangible resource management that we are all familiar with. In that sense, he uses care in terms of "***care for"***—we all work to care for the tangible resource. Yet Shozo tells us that care is not about the tangible resource, rather it is "of the human heart." In this way, Shozo uses care in terms of "***care about****."* How can anyone come to support the ***care for*** the tangible resource unless they first come to ***care about*** the resource.

In essence, Shozo describes the role of interpretation. By linking tangible resources to their intangible meanings, interpretation helps audiences both care *about* and encourages them to care *for* resources.

This only occurs when resource professionals—and that would be you—understand the sovereignty of the visitor. Don't misunderstand. When I say the visitor is sovereign, I am not suggesting the customer is always right. Most of us work for protection agencies and appropriately prevent audiences from doing physical harm. However, in terms of what visitors believe, think, and feel, they are sovereign. No matter how much confidence we may have in our science and our professional procedures, no matter how enthusiastic and polished our presentations, the audience ultimately decides if the resource has value. The audience determines if they will care enough about the resource in order to support the care for the resource.

This requires that interpreters and other resource professionals meet audiences on their own ground. While it is easier to speak and write for those who understand our rules and think the way we do, an understanding of the resource challenges that lay before us will quickly illuminate the need to cultivate the support of the broadest possible spectrum of people and points of view.

The role of interpretation is to facilitate connections between the meanings of the resource and the interests of the visitor. Interpretation does not provide answers; it poses questions. Interpretation does not teach; it offers opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections. Interpretation does not educate; it provokes increasingly sophisticated appreciation and understanding. Interpretation does not tell people how it is; it reveals personal significance.

Central to effective interpretation is the understanding that resources possess a plurality of meanings. These meanings come from a variety of sources. Meanings may be grouped in at least two important categories: ascribed and inherent. Donald Worster, the preeminent scholar of environmental history, writes of the Grand Canyon, "Environmental history looks very different if you stay up on the plateau, prowling around the human structures that have accreted here, than if you plunge deep within

the chasm."1

First the ascribed.

Again Worster: "What we mean by nature profoundly depends on who is speaking and at what point and place in time. It is culturally determined." Surely most sites—natural, historic, and cultural, have been affected by the changing scholarship, tradition, folkways, societal conflict, geographical influences, and group identity that comes with time. Indeed, many will say that all meanings are the subjective projections of the values and beliefs of people in various cultures. It might be argued that parks, refuges, reserves, and museums are by definition cultural abstractions identified and labeled as something of value—something worth saving.

Yet others resist the abandonment of a reality or truth. They may recognize and even be interested in ascribed meanings, but for them, the resource has meanings that can only be described as inherent. Donald Worster recognizes that possibility as he leads the reader on a walk to Phantom Ranch at the bottom of the Canyon. "Something more, something larger, looms and impresses, challenges and defines. Beneath all the texts, beneath our constructions, a real Canyon, I believe, is out there, one that can be discovered and revealed, not merely one created by elites or nonelites."

This revelation of the larger seems to be an essential function of science, the discovery and explanation of the inherent—the real.

But are inherent meanings restricted to the scientific? Worster doesn't comment, but ask a Hopi about the inherent meaning of the Canyon. If that person chooses to share something of significance and value they might describe a particular place in the Canyon as the source of their origin.

How about an artist—someone who moves in the ether of color or sound? Is the inherent meaning for them materialistic, theological, mythological, or aesthetic? Perhaps all of them?

The distinction between ascribed and inherent is important as meanings provide the fiber for personal connection—intellectual, emotional, and perhaps spiritual, for those who may or may not exercise stewardship. Those who hold a place dear often do so because they believe it contains the truth. It is difficult for them to see that others could view the place differently. And of course, here is the difficulty, one person's or audience's inherent meaning is another's ascribed.

The Interpretive Development Program holds that all these meanings, and many more, provide reason enough to care about the resource and develop grounds for caring for the resource. All are invited to declare with certainty that which is inherent and obvious, and that which is ascribed. The profession of interpretation has no need—or mandate from a democratic government, for that matter—to choose or disregard a particular truth. The profession of interpretation has a much more practical mission: to provide for

both the protection and enjoyment of resources that connect us to our heritage—and perhaps for our very survival.

Don't misinterpret me! I am not advocating a relativism that holds all data, stories, and interpretations to be of equal value. The reader knows, certainly better than I, which ones hold the truth.

Interpretation in the field ***really is*** a practical thing. What is relevant to the audience determines the starting point for successful interpretation. When interpreters do their jobs well, they meet visitors at the place where resource meanings are relevant to them, where the truth is inherent for them, and then provide additional opportunities for personal emotional and intellectual connections.

There is a marketplace of relevant meanings out there. Audiences are the customers. Interpreters need to recognize and be fluent in the meanings that are attached to their site, meanings that are common and those which are more obscure. In places where science is an important part of the story, it will be a relevant and sought after commodity by a significant part of the audience. At most sites, leaving out science or diminishing its influence and power by automatically providing "equal time" to other perspectives simply won't work.

But interpretation cannot just pander to existing perspectives. It also has the responsibility to provoke new feelings and new thinking.

This responsibility to provoke is critical for satisfying the audience's desire to find something of personal value. Provocation provides access to ever greater complexity, understanding, appreciation, and attachment. It also allows for the accurate articulation and description of a variety of potential meanings.

Two examples:
While interpreting a feature in terms of geologic time I might become aware that the person I am speaking with is a Creationist. To successfully provoke, I must first establish personal relevance. Dismissing creationism or taking up the evolutionist side of a dichotomy fails to do this. A successful interpreter, in these circumstances, knows that it is possible to believe in God and evolution and that many creationists embrace aspects of science. The individual may be a Flat Earther, a Geocentrist, a Young-Earth Creationist, an Old-Earth Creationist, a Gap Creationist, a Day-Age Creationist, a Progressive Creationist, an Intelligent Design Creationist, an Evolutionary Creationist, a believer in Theistic Evolution, or something else all together. ***Whichever perspective the individual adheres to, their support for and participation in preservation and stewardship is equally valuable.*** An appropriate interpretive strategy might be to ask "You're a creationist—what kind?" The answer might allow us to discuss ways in which the feature might fit into the individual's belief system. In the exchange, I might agree that many creationists employ the methodologies and processes of science. In this way I'm hoping to establish personal relevance and an opportunity to provoke. I might use the conversation to move into descriptions of other ways the feature might be viewed—

by native people, perhaps, or by scientists. I might explore the differences between creationists who use some science and canonical science, or “pure science,” by pointing out that creationists begin with the assumption there is a creator God. Conversely, canonical scientists assume the world has an objective reality that can be understood via observation, testing, and logical analysis, and that the existence or non-existence of God cannot be established by science. As an interpreter, I am not attempting to change the beliefs of my audience. Rather, I am striving for an ah-ha moment or the statement, “I never thought of that before.”

A second example:
I can have a similar interpretive encounter with an individual who understands the workings of science and believes it to be the only valid means of explaining the natural world. Again, my role is to establish relevance and I might do so by engaging in a conversation about the power and aesthetic nature of science. Once relevance is established, I might then attempt to provoke by stating, “As useful and revealing as science is, it still doesn’t answer all the questions. Science can explain how this feature developed the way it has, but it can’t tell us why because it can’t address the metaphysical. There seems to be a need in humanity for an understandable purpose that, so far anyway, our knowledge has not captured.”

Hopefully these examples illustrate the interpreter’s role as a facilitator. The Interpretive Development Program does not suggest that any resource professionals abandon their beliefs and perspectives. Instead, resource professionals must take an anthropological position of understanding perspectives and diverse meanings, and stand outside of perspectives and meanings in order to communicate and provide opportunities for audiences to make personal, real, and significant connections to the resource.

The Interpretive Development Program both teaches interpreters how to approach audiences in this manner and is beginning to hold them accountable for doing so.

There are many strategies that help implement these ideas. I wish to share a few strategies that I feel are especially important for all resource professionals, regardless of their field, to understand and utilize.

First: We need to know more about our audiences! Accurate and up-to-date knowledge of audience demographics, perceptions, and customer satisfaction are tremendously valuable. However, there is an equal if not greater need to identify and understand what the resource means to the audiences that interact with it.

It is an important question. If we ask, “What does the forest mean to you?”—surely we will get a variety of answers. If the answer is “A place of solitude, renewal, and creation,” we need to create a certain kind of interpretive product. If it is a place “where I can get bitten by a snake,” we need to create another. If it is a place of economic opportunity, we need yet a third. If we get all of these answers and more, we need to plan and account for them.

The Interpretive Development Program is encouraging interpreters when they informally encounter audiences to ask questions like, “What did you hope to find here? What do you hope your children will take from this experience? If you had my job, what would you tell people? What did you think about when you saw the bison?” The collection of the answers they receive will not be scientific, but we believe these answers will create a greater understanding of audiences and more effective interpretive interactions than the old approach of “Where are you from?”

A second strategy for meeting audiences where they are:

Never replace an existing meaning or perspective with a new one. Doing so denies the sovereignty of the audience that holds a meaning as inherent, denies their connection to the resource, and creates unnecessary controversy.

It is a mistake that occurs often as new information, methodology, and ideology develop. It can happen in official presentations as well as informal conversation. However it occurs, it damages support.

New meanings and perspectives should be introduced as an addition to or in relationship to existing meanings and perspectives. Interpreters first establish relevance, then provoke new understanding and appreciation.

Third:

Present multiple points of view. Interpreting multiple points of view is a technique that respectfully, fairly, and accurately describes and explores two or more meanings, perspectives, opinions, ideologies, or ways of looking at the same resource or resources. Each meaning or perspective provides significantly different opportunities for the audience to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the resource. These meanings or perspectives can be from the past or the present, may disagree or conflict, but may simply illustrate difference.

Interpreting multiple points of view is an effective interpretive technique for at least four reasons: a) it provides opportunities for more audiences to find more relevance; b) it provides opportunities for greater provocation; c) it creates an environment of respect that allows for dialogue rather than conflict; d) when controversial resource management decisions are made, it provides a moral high ground for the explanation of the agency’s position.

My fourth and last suggested strategy for meeting audiences where they are:

Know when a situation is interpretive and when it is not. A situation is not interpretive when the audience has no interest in opportunities for emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. This might happen when the situation is charged with emotion—for example when the re-introduction of a species is feared as an assault on freedom. Or it might also occur when audiences have a strong political or

ideological agenda. Of course these people deserve information and communication services and those services might be delivered by an interpreter. But the goal of those encounters is not primarily to provoke greater care about or care for the resource. Often those audiences already do care a great deal about the resource. The controversy and maneuvering necessary in these circumstances require different and, obviously, very important skills.

Finally, it is important to recognize that resource management and interpretation have a great deal in common. They each apply different knowledge and skills to the preservation of the resource. I am the reader who agrees that both professions serve the mission more effectively when they work in relationship with each other.

Relationship is a key concept here. Interpreters are dependent upon resource managers' expertise and immediate experience of the resource. However, if either or both view that relationship as the simple handing off of information, if the multiple meanings of the resource are not taken into account, if the focus is on a single message that ignores the meanings ascribed to the resource by others, then critical opportunities for building constituency are missed. Interpreters are not simply the communicators of a resource management perspective. They are also the conduit through which resource management might better understand audiences and the ways in which the public finds meaning in and provides support for the care of the resource.

You can help. Support the professional development of interpreters at your site. Demand professionalism from them. If they are not familiar with the ideas and concepts presented here, direct them to the Interpretive Development Program- encourage their participation.

Most specifically, the new Module 340: Advanced Research and Resource Liaison develops and measures interpreters' abilities in subject matter knowledge and research, knowledge of audiences, liaison with resource managers and other experts, and in the interpretive application of all of these.

All of this material, content outlines, references and resources, as well as the assessment tool for certification are available on at **www.nps.gov/idp/interp** for anyone who wishes to view or pursue them.

We all know the stakes are high.

We face ever greater acceleration of change and an ever more diverse public.

Can your resource afford to communicate only one meaning?

Can your resource afford to speak to only those who already agree?

If your resource does not clearly communicate a variety of meanings and values that engender care for, what will it be like in fifty years?

One hundred?

Two hundred?

Forever is a very long time.

Interpretation can help.

Be relevant or become a relic.

1All Daniel Worster quotes from the transcript of a paper presented by Worester at Albright Training Center

Advanced Knowledge of the Audience

Helps connect audience interests and perspectives to resource meanings.

Helps to identify ways the resource is relevant to given audiences.

Helps interpreters to identify multiple audience interests and perspectives as well as ways the resource appears relevant to distinct audiences.

Helps interpreters meet audiences on their own terms.

Helps interpreters to use Advanced Knowledge of the Resource to tailor interpretive programs and services to specific audiences.

Helps interpreters to interpret multiple meanings, multiple points of view, critical resource issues, and controversial subjects.

Provides essential elements for strategies of inclusion.

Provides essential elements for establishing and enhancing constituencies.

Remember to include off-site audiences who access your site via outreach services, who never visit your site, and who represent under-represented groups at your site.

Consider the variety of subjective perspectives that affect the way audiences perceive and interact with resources: age, learning styles, direct and indirect experience with your site, culture, country of origin, religion, disabilities, education, economic class, mood, and social group.

People differ in their motivation for visiting your site. They have various expectations for their visit. They arrive with prior perspectives on science, history, and the subject matter of your site.

Audience research should go beyond formal social science studies. Each interpreter has an ongoing responsibility to use personal research techniques to pursue Advanced Knowledge of the Audience relevant to their resource.

Sources for Knowledge of the Audience

Remember that the general does not equal the specific. All audience research, ranging from formal social science and organized studies to informal, personal, and anecdotal observations, provides data and information about groups of people. KA does not equal knowledge of the individual visitor. Individual visitors can become an exception to audience generalizations as each visitor represents subjective influences, variables, and nuances that do not conform to generalizations.

Social Science and Organized Studies

NPS Social Science Research Review Series
NPS Visitor Services Project (over 120 visitor studies in individual NPS units)
Focus Groups (Federal Government sites need OMB approval of questions for groups of 10 or more people)
Universities and other academic partners

Personal Research – Direct Contact with Audiences

Conversation with audiences before, during, and after programs
Audience comments after programs
Observation of audiences
Conversations with stakeholders – groups with a specific interest in the resources
Conversations with leaders, elders, or other respected members of groups
Visitor comments in guest registers

Personal Research – Secondary Sources

State and local agencies involved in commerce and tourism
Local chambers of commerce
Visitor information bureaus
Private sector marketing studies
United States Census records and analysis
United States Commerce Department international visitor information
NPS Office of International Affairs
Books, journals, educational materials, and magazines
Worldwide Web sites (need for critical evaluation of accuracy)
Conversation with experts – group representatives, sociologists, and ethnographers
Conversation with other interpreters at your site
Collaboration with other nearby or related sites and parks

Tips for Audience Research

Personal Research – Direct Contact with Audiences

Categorize observations and conversations into potential resource meanings, audience interests, and personal connections

Respect audience privacy in observations
- Do not follow audience members
- Do not eavesdrop

Observe what types of groups seem attracted to specific resources and activities

Talk to audiences – vital research conducted by front-line interpreters
- When possible, talk with people that do not like interpretive services offered – their criticism can lead to better understanding of what people in their group desire

Do not force yourself on audiences, or pry into their conversations. Seek opportunities for relaxed conversation. Ask questions like:
- What does this place mean to you?
- What did you think about when you encountered a given resource?
- If you were a ranger, what would you want visitors to understand or care about?
- What should your kids know about this place and why?
- What made you decide to visit this place?
- What did you know about this place before you came here?
- What did you expect to gain from a visit to this place?
- What did you know about this place before you came here?
- What does it feel like or what does it mean to you when you do a given recreational activity?

When talking with special interest groups and other stakeholders:
- Become aware of the official relationship between a given group and your site.
- Do not interfere with an official relationship.
- Be clear and accurate about what you can and cannot address.
- Remember always to act as an ambassador for your site and agency.

Know enough about the group to ask the right questions, show respect, and display courtesy.
- If possible, ask stakeholders to make presentations to resource staff and fellow interpreters.

Personal Research – Secondary Sources

Know the demographics of audiences interacting with the resources.

Know the demographics of communities in the areas affecting resources as well as regional and national trends and priorities.

Questions for investigation:

- What is the culture of a given group?
- What is the history of a given group?
- What are the issues of a given group?
- What are the customs and traditions of a given group?
- What is the relationship to the resource of a given group?
- What is the motivation for interacting with the resource of a given group?
- What are the physical needs of a given group?
- What gestures of respect would be meaningful to a given group?
- What is the common ground between one or more given groups?
- What are the differences between given groups?
- Does a given group have a specific jargon or technical vocabulary that can be shared or avoided?
- What is the relevant knowledge of the resource for a given group?
- What are appropriate interpretive techniques for a given group?

Document your conclusions:

- Record impressions and conclusions.
- Continually measure personal conclusions against new research and data.
- Share and check conclusions with the conclusions of others.
- Avoid stereotyping and definitive characterizations of individuals and groups.
- Recognize the inherent limitations of all research methods.

Social Science Studies Collection

NPS Social Science Program 11/2003

"The management of the National Park System requires a continuous set of decisions, some small, some large, all important. Many affect people—including visitors, employees, concessioners, nearby communities, and National Park Service (NPS) partners. An accurate understanding of the relationship between people and parks is critical to both protecting resources unimpaired *and* providing for public enjoyment. The social sciences—those sciences that explore the human condition—are valued disciplines in the scientific repertoire needed by the NPS."

Dr. Michael A. Soukup, Associate Director,
Natural Resource Stewardship and Science

As part of an effort to conduct and promote state- of- the- art social science related to the mission of the National Park Service, and deliver usable knowledge to NPS managers and the public, the Social Science Program has established the **Social Science Studies Collection.**

This collection reflects a growing demand by park managers for information on the relationship between people and parks. Currently, it includes more than 100 records including study reports, images and other documents produced by or for the NPS from disciplines such as recreation resource management, economics, geography, psychology, political science, and sociology. To search the collection, read, and print these study reports and other documents, visit the **NPS Focus Digital Library & Research Station** website* at **http://focus.inside.nps.gov/**.

Issues Examined

- Visitor demographics and characteristics
- Motivations for park visits
- Opinions and preferences toward NPS interpretive services
- Evaluation of NPS exhibits
- Recreation use and use patterns
- Public involvement in resource management
- Economic impacts of park visitation
- Crowding and carrying capacity
- Human-wildlife interactions
- Meanings and values of place
- Attitudes toward the Recreation Fee
- Demonstration Program
- Alternative transportation options
- Safety and risk management
- Recommendations for future planning and park management

NPS Focus Digital Library Features

- One-stop search across NPS and partner systems
- High resolution images and text documents for various needs
- Fast download with two display formats
- Full-text search capability
- Partners: NC State University Library, State Park Websites, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (expected)

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Searching Social Science Studies Collection

The NPS Focus Digital Library and Research Station provides a one-stop searching solution to find information by and about the National Park Service. Currently a growing number of social science study reports, other documents, and images are being incorporated into the system. Visit the **NPS Focus** website* at http://focus.inside.nps.gov/ to find out more about the **Social Science Studies Collection**.

1. Go to InsideNPS website at **http://www.inside.nps.gov/**.

2. Click on the button, second from the right on the menu bar. You may bookmark this page for future visits.

3. Select the **Advanced Search** option located on the left side of the menu.

4. Type in the topics that you are searching for in the "**Type in Search Term(s)" fields**. These are some examples:
   Visitor study, interpretation, Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, demographics, safety, crowding, hiking, human-wildlife interaction, sense of place, knowledge of the audience
   Or, specify the search such as Yosemite National Park **and** visitor.

5. In the **Limit Search** Field, under **NPS Digital Library Collection**, select Social Science Studies Collection.

6. Click on the button, at the bottom of the page and wait for a few seconds for the search engine to capture the records.

7. When the research engine stops and shows the underlined text: **NPS Digital Library** and a number showing the number of records found, click on that underlined text.

8. You will see a list of documents as a result of your search. Select the **title** of the document to view the record including summary and contents.

9. The **full-text document** could be viewed in JPG or DjVu formats. For advanced viewing and printing, consider downloading a free software "DjVu" at **www.lizardtech.com/plugin/**.

Strategies for Acquiring Knowledge of the Resource

Learn the professional philosophies, methodologies, standards, and assumptions associated with the resource.

Establish personal contact with researchers conducting work in the field related to the resource.

Read new publications as well as reviews of new publications. Professional journals provide the most up-to-date treatments.

Read publications that describe the evolution of a scientific or historical issue or idea. Seek bibliographic essays in professional journals. Contact scholars and specialists in this field.

Compare the subject matter with similar subjects in different geographical areas, conditions, time periods, interpretations, and theories.

Consult unpublished sources: site collections, documents, permit reports, compliance records, resource management reports, field notes, and exhibit plans.

Consult local sources and specialists: naturalists, clubs, historical societies, newspapers, and oral histories.

Consult the Worldwide Web, but remain wary of the intent and perspective of individual sites. Take the time for a skillful evaluation of sources in a site.

Become totally immersed in the resource in all its characteristics.

Move beyond established sources to consider the insight of personal anecdotes, stories, oral tradition, local beliefs, empathy, and memory.

Engage in an ongoing professional dialogue with resource specialists and other interpreters.

Consider definitions:

Science – “Science…is the organized, systematic enterprise that gathers knowledge about the world and condenses the knowledge into testable laws and principles.” Edward O. Wilson (*Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1998, P. 53).

History – “A historian is someone (anyone) who asks an open-ended question about past events and answers it with selected facts which are arranged in the form of an explanatory paradigm.” David Hackett Fischer (*Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, 1979, xv).

Sources for Knowledge of the Resource

History

Primary Sources:
- Diaries
- Personal journals
- Letters
- Speeches
- Government correspondence
- Public records
- Contemporary newspapers
- Contemporary music
- Contemporary literature
- Contemporary art
- Contemporary drama
- Material culture
- Buildings
- Oral history

Secondary Sources:
- Peer-reviewed history journals
- Review articles that describe and synthesize other explanations
- Dissertations, compliance reports, project completion reports, cultural landscape reports, historic resource studies, historic structure reports, and other types of “gray literature”
- Monographs
- Textbooks
- Worldwide Web journals and sites – some peer reviewed, others not
- Popular literature – *American Heritage*, *Civil War Times Illustrated*, and the *Magazine of History*
- Interviews with scholars
- Educational courses, classes, and lectures
- Television documentaries – Public Broadcasting, History Channel, and the Discovery Channel
- Museum exhibits

Science

Primary Sources:
- Park resource management documents
- Inventory and monitoring data
- Data generated by experiment or test

Secondary Sources:
- Peer-reviewed science journals
- Review articles that synthesize the conclusions of primary sources
- Technical reports, dissertations, project completion reports, permit reports, and other types of unpublished “gray literature”
- Proceedings and abstracts
- Monographs
- Textbooks
- Worldwide Web journals and sites – some peer reviewed, others not
- Popular literature – *National Geographic*, *Scientific America*, and *Nature*
- Interviews with scholars
- Educational courses, classes, and lectures
- Television documentaries – Public Broadcasting and the Discovery Channel
- Museum exhibits

Connecting Resource Meanings with Audience Interests

Multiple meanings in resources

- Some resource meanings are inherent, elemental, intrinsic, or “true” (the Lewis and Clark Expedition documented much of the Louisiana Purchase).
- People sometimes ascribe or add meanings to a resource (international significance of the Lewis and Clark Expedition).

Multiple audience interests and perspectives

- Different meanings of the resource are relevant to different audiences and audience members (interest in the natural history documentation of the Lewis and Clark Expedition; interest in American Indians; interest in the clash of cultures).
- Different audiences and audience members consider different meanings as inherent or “true (some may see the Lewis and Clark Expedition as a precursor to progress; others as an act of hegemony by the United States upon American Indian nations; others as a great advance in science).
- Audiences and audience members ascribe meaning based on what seems relevant to them, their experience with the resource, and their beliefs.
- Through discussion and exposure to different perspectives, audiences and audience members can create new understandings and meanings for themselves and others.

Using multiple resource meanings to connect to multiple audience interest and perspectives

- Recognize the right for audiences and audience members to have and maintain their own perspectives.
- Link appropriate resource meanings to the interests and perspectives of the audience to establish relevance.
- Use other meanings to provoke consideration of additional perspectives and emotional and intellectual connections to the resource.
- Knowledge of the resource can provide a variety of potential meanings.
- Use knowledge of the resource to establish relevance and provoke consideration of new perspectives and/or intellectual and emotional connections to the resource.
- Use knowledge of the audience to identify audience interests and perspectives.
- Use knowledge of the audience to include a variety of perspective, explanations, meanings, and interpretations to diverse audiences.

To maximize effectiveness, interpretive programs and media must reflect multiple resource meanings and multiple audience interests and perspectives.

Sources of Meanings

One person's inherent meaning is another person's ascribed meaning.

NOT advocating relativism – the perspective that all points of view thought to have equal value.

Sources

- Informal audience questions
- Feedback from previous programs
- Formal surveys
- Internet searches
- Research (avoid stereotypes-seek complexity)
- Discussion with resource management specialists
- Park plans and documents

Examples

Institution of Slavery

Enslaved people's perspectives
Slaveowners perspectives
Contemporary free African-Americans perspectives
Abolitionists perspectives
Politicians perspectives
Today's African-American perspectives
Economic meanings
Religious meanings
Political meanings
Social meanings

Wolf Re-introduction

Environmentalists positions
Ranchers positions
Agencies positions
Local governments positions
Meaning to ecosystem
Meaning to tourism
Meaning to other resource management efforts
Meaning to ranching economy

Techniques to Incorporate Multiple Meanings

Take an anthropological approach – set aside personal views and biases – really try to understand other points of view.

Audience should be able to connect their perspectives to the meanings most relevant to them

Do not attempt to replace meanings/perspectives of an individual.

Use respectful language and honesty.

> Example: Correction to exhibit text at Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site: “White people said the Civil War was about states’ rights or about preserving the Union” to “Many White people said the Civil War was about states’ rights or about preserving the Union.”

Introduce new “something elses” via discussion.

Introduce universal concepts linked to meanings.

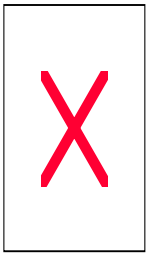
Establish relevance first; then provoke – we have an obligation to provoke

Once relevance established, provide additional perspectives, points of view, and meanings to stimulate dialogue and provocation to get to REFLECTION.

Wayside Exhibits – express multiple meanings through a series of wayside exhibits.

Museum Exhibits – express multiple meanings through companion sections.

Films – use variety of eyewitness quotations and commentaries from experts.



Techniques

For Interpreting Controversial Subjects

- **Interpret multiple points of view**
- **Never *replace* one meaning with another**
- **Make agency's position an equal in the discussion**
- **Know the difference between interpretation and other responsibilities**
- **Plan balance of effect**
- **Acknowledge disagreements**
- **Use universal concepts**
- **Make gestures of respect**
- **Use accurate language**
- **Create strategies ahead of time**

Controversy as Opportunity

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Abstract: Both field interpreters and managers often avoid controversy. The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program maintains that controversy actually provides opportunities to cultivate a broader stewardship ethic. Interpreters who successfully interpret controversy do so by applying fundamental interpretive tools, models, and practices. Those interpreters establish the resource's relevance and then use other meanings and perspectives to provoke deeper emotional and intellectual connections. Interpreters must be prepared with comprehensive knowledge of their resource and knowledge of their audiences. They must be able to connect multiple resource meanings to multiple audience interests and perspectives as well as apply the techniques of interpreting multiple points of view. The cumulative mastery of these tools, models, and practices takes the risk out of controversy and creates interpretive products that encourage multiple perspectives, respectful dialogue, and increased care about the resource.

Key Words: controversy, revelation, provocation, multiple resource meanings, multiple audience perspectives, "Process Model," multiple points of view,

Introduction

Interpreting controversy can be scary for interpreters who aren't prepared and for supervisors who haven't got the time or desire to soothe angry audiences. Most of the time, it's easier to give the facts, change the subject, disavow responsibility, or defer to management.

Is denial of the disputed the best way to win support and exercise stewardship?

The National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program suggests controversy is opportunity.[i] When a resource is controversial it is also relevant. When a resource is relevant, it can provoke new thinking and new feelings. Controversy means somebody cares a*bout* the resource. When people care *about* the resource, there is great potential for them to care *for* the resource.

Interpreting controversy does not require skills, talents, or abilities beyond the application of fundamental interpretive practices and understandings. Interpreters have to know a lot about their resource and their audiences. They also must use techniques that turn debate into discussion. With such preparation, a thoughtful interpreter can almost always pre-empt conflict and turn controversy into connection.

The Interpretive Development Program offers several interpretive tools whose cumulative mastery will result in the effective interpretation of controversy.

Tangibles/Intangibles/Universal Concepts

Interpretation can be viewed as a process that links a tangible resource to its intangible meanings. Just as the whole resource can act as an icon or window to meaning, so can any of its parts. The

most powerful or broadly relevant meanings that can be linked with a resource are universal concepts—ideas and concepts that almost everyone can relate to, but do not mean the same to any two people. Examples of universal concepts include joy, death, family, suffering, love, birth, etc. Interpreting controversy requires the interpreter to understand the multiple meanings of a resource. Linking the intangible to the tangible is an essential step in the process.[ii]

The Interpretive Equation

The Interpretive Equation provides another tool for facilitating connections between the audiences' interests and the meanings of the resource. The Interpretive Equation is a metaphor for the sequence of work interpreters use when developing interpretive products.

(KR + KA) AT = IO
KR = Knowledge of the Resource
KA = Knowledge of the Audience
AT = Appropriate Technique
IO = Interpretive Opportunity.[iii]

To successfully interpret controversy, interpreters must have extensive KR and KA. Interpreters must know about the resource's multiple meanings, the information, data, sources, and interpretations that support those meanings, as well as the academic, traditional, and social contexts from which that information comes.[iv] Similarly, an understanding of audience perspectives, multiple points of view, cultural backgrounds, etc is essential for anticipating disagreement, creating an environment of respect, establishing relevance, and provoking new connections to the meanings of the resource.

Interpreters are fortunate when formal audience demographics, surveys, and studies are available for their resource. However, all interpreters can gain important knowledge simply by talking with their audiences. Informal questions asked at appropriate times (What did you hope to find when you came here? What do you hope your children will carry home with them? What did you think of when you saw the canyon? If you had my job, what would you tell people?) can reveal a great deal about the meanings audiences ascribe to resources as well as their points of view about those meanings. Audience responses that express intangible meanings can be linked to tangible resources that support those meanings or provoke connections with new ones. Responses that focus on tangible resources provide the interpreter with opportunities to attach meanings (KR). [v]

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are essential tools that focus and help interpreters concisely articulate what they want to say about the resource. Interpretive themes *are not* "take home messages" audiences should be able to recite at the end of the experience. Audience members are "sovereign" and may or may not formulate their own ideas and ascribe their own meanings in reaction to interpretive products.

Interpretive themes are one sentence, express an idea, and link a tangible resource to one or more intangible meanings. The most compelling interpretive themes link a tangible resource to a universal concept.[vi]

Process Model[vii]

The tools described above provide the basic developmental process for any interpretive product.

1. Select a tangible object or resource.
2. Brainstorm all the possible intangible meanings—processes, ideas, values, and universal concepts that can be associated with the tangible. Sufficient KR, additional research, and the input of others will provide numerous tangible/intangible links.
3. Select an intended audience and determine what the tangible resource means to them. Additional research and KA might be required.
4. Based on the audience, create an interpretive theme that links the tangible to a universal concept.
5. Select tangible/intangible links that support the theme. Organize the links so that they cohesively develop an idea or ideas for the audience. Provide information, tell stories, conduct activities, and use descriptive language to illustrate the tangible/intangible links. Plan effective transitions to move from one tangible/intangible link to another.

Connecting multiple resource meanings to multiple audience interests and perspectives.[viii]

Connecting multiple resource meanings to multiple audience interests and perspectives is foundational to full performance interpretation. Because the goal of interpretation is to provoke care *about* the resource as a pre-requisite to stewardship behavior or care *for* the resource, interpreters must continually seek to meet diverse audience perspectives with appropriate and diverse resource meanings.

Some resource meanings are "inherent." These are meanings that can be discovered or revealed, are factual, and are essential to the resource possessing meaning at all. Religious perspectives like Creationism, cultural perspectives like Native American creation stories, and scientific explanations each maintain the resource has an essential "truth" or reality that can be discovered and understood. These truths are more or less obvious and exclusive to different groups and individuals depending on their culture, traditions, beliefs, and education.

Some resource meanings are ascribed. As time passes and culture changes, so do perspectives, perceptions, and ways of evaluating and understanding the resource. New interpretations, explanations, and discoveries add additional meanings to the resource. Information sources, audiences, interpreters, managers, agencies, experts, tradition, educational institutions, and others ascribe meanings to the resource. Meanings that are inherent to some are clearly ascribed meanings to others and visa versa. Each audience member has unique interests and perspectives and will relate to different resource meanings.

Revelation and Provocation

New perspectives and differing beliefs are most successfully introduced when audience members are comfortable, secure, and interested. Interpreters use KA to link appropriate resource meanings (KR) to the interests and perspectives of the audience and establish the relevance **of the resource. Once the relevance of the resource is established for an audience member, an interpreter can use other resource meanings (KR), new perspectives, and differing beliefs to** provoke **additional emotional and intellectual connections to the**

resource. Often these connections can also be pursued in an attempt to make even more connections but many audience members react to provocation with personal reflection. Usually, provocation can occur more quickly than the establishment of relevance.

Interpreters have a responsibility to provoke—provide opportunities for audiences to make their own emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource. Interpreters are obligated to do more than re-enforce or pander to audience interests and perspectives. Interpreters cannot "force" new perspectives, meanings, or points of view, but, after having established relevance, must continually provide new perspectives, meanings, and points of view as opportunities to provoke new connections—enriched feelings and thought about the resource.

Techniques for connecting multiple resource meanings to multiple audience interests and perspectives.

Do not attempt to replace an existing resource meaning or perspective with a new one. Controversy often arises from audiences feeling threatened that their meanings and perspectives are under attack. Use existing audience meanings and perspectives to establish relevance and comfort before introducing new meanings and perspectives. Offer new meanings and perspectives as "something else" to consider, not as a preferred or better way of connecting to the resource.

Identify and use universal concepts. Universal concepts establish common ground between the interpreter and audience as well as between audience members. Universal concepts are most powerful to a given audience when they are approached through the specific perspectives and culture of a given audience. Seek to link a single universal concept to multiple intangible meanings (ideas, processes, values, concepts, systems, etc.) each of which represents an alternative meaning or perspective on the resource.

Use accurate and respectful language that identifies the perspective from which information is presented.

- Example: "The white South believed…" rather than "The South believed…"
- Example: "Scientists estimate the feature is 20 million years old…" rather than "The feature is 20 million years old…"
- Example: "Hopi people say…" rather than "Hopi people are…"

Seek to balance audience mental comfort with challenge of impact and effect. It may take a great deal of space or time to establish relevance and an environment of comfort that allows for the introduction of a single new perspective or meaning. Interpreters must "earn" the opportunity to provoke.

Acknowledge audience perspectives and beliefs with respect and honesty.

Interpret multiple points of view[ix]

Interpreting multiple points of view is a technique that respectfully, fairly, and accurately describes and explores two or more meanings, perspectives, opinions, ideologies, or ways of looking at the same resource or resources. Each meaning or perspective provides significantly

different opportunities for the audience to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to the resource. These meanings or perspectives can be from the past or the present, may disagree or conflict, but may simply illustrate "difference."

Interpreting multiple points of view is an effective interpretive technique for three reasons: 1) it provides opportunities for more audiences to find relevance; 2) it provides opportunities for greater provocation; and, 3) it creates an environment of respect that allows for dialogue rather than conflict.

Techniques for interpreting multiple points of view.

Develop interpretive products using interpretive themes with two universal concepts. The disciplined application of this tool results in interpretation that explores multiple meanings.

Use a single tangible resource as a symbol for or to represent different meanings and/or perspectives.

- Example: California condors represent what some people see to be a futile waste of money on an almost extinct species AND what some people see as evidence of the human ability to effect nature in a positive way.
- Example: The communion chalice in a mission in San Antonio represents religious beliefs and faith AND the expansion of European ideas and culture AND an assault on native cultures.

Use two or more tangible resources as symbols for or to represent different meanings and/or perspectives.

- Example: The bald eagle is an example of charismatic megafauna that represents American ideals. The prairie dog represents "pest" species. However, in some places, the preservation of the eagle depends on the preservation of the prairie dog. Together they represent the relationships of an ecosystem and strategies for stewardship.
- Example: The pike or spear that John Brown intended to arm enslaved people with represents terrorism. Dangerfield Newby, an ex-enslaved man who fought with Brown to free his family represents Brown the freedom fighter. Together they pose moral questions about violence and law.

Select symbols, meanings, and perspectives that balance and fairly represent a variety of perspectives. It's tempting to select opposites. Extremes may eclipse more representative perspectives. Interpretive programs that do this tend to be like political talk shows that focus more on conflict than substance. If extreme positions help establish relevance, be sure to include other perspectives as well.

Controversy[x]

Controversy is the result of multiple resource meanings and/or audience perspectives competing for emphasis in presentations or influence on policy and management decisions. Often new data, policies, theories, or interpretations will cause controversy. When controversy is present, it can be used to provide opportunities for audiences to make their own emotional and intellectual connections to the meanings of the resource.

Interpreters must respect and acknowledge the rights of audience members to hold and maintain their own beliefs to successfully interpret controversy. The effective application of the tools and models described above usually disarms controversy, allows different perspectives to dialogue, and provides opportunities for audiences with diverse perspectives to make personal connections with the meanings of the resource.

Techniques for interpreting controversy.

Recognize when a situation or issue is not interpretive. Do not attempt to interpret controversy when audiences have a primary agenda of challenging or changing policy, interrupting interpretive programs, or insulting interpreters or management. Those audiences are outside the scope of interpretation. Interpreters must recognize when facilitating opportunities for audience connections to the resource is no longer likely to succeed and a different service (usually determined by management i.e. informational briefings, public hearings, negotiation, political strategy) is required. Interpreters are obligated to provide these services and/or politely disengage from interpretive efforts and/or respond in manner as directed by management.

Acknowledge that resource meanings and audience perspectives toward those meanings can conflict. Encourage audience members to consider alternative perspectives and determine their own "truth." Acknowledge that some resource meanings and audience perspectives suggest behaviors that are destructive to the resource and/or audiences. Acknowledge agencies are responsible for making preservation decisions based on scientific observation, research, and scholarship. Know and understand agency decision making process and positions on resource management and preservation. When appropriate, articulate and interpret agency decision making process and positions on preservation within the context of differing positions. Acknowledge that, except for preservation issues, the agency has no official position on the meanings of the resource and that the resource is an appropriate place for the exploration of multiple meanings and perspectives.

Articulate what is known and what is not known about the resource and perspectives that conflict. Describe the processes by which information is known and interpreted. Volunteer potential or possible explanations for what is not known and reasons why perspectives conflict—this can be very provoking. Articulate multiple explanations and point out the complexity of science and history.

Create plans for interpreting controversial issues. Research all potential resource meanings (KR) relevant to the issue as well as potential audience perspectives (KA). Identify specific ways of linking multiple resource meanings with multiple audience interests and perspectives as well as strategies for interpreting multiple points of view.

Communicate about potentially controversial topics with resource management and site management. Advocate for or against the use of interpretation to the degree it can be effective in facilitating opportunities for intellectual and emotional connections to the resource. Request input and specific instructions on appropriate actions to take when confronted by ideology or politics that lie outside the scope of interpretation.

Conclusion

Controversy is derived from difference but does not have to threaten mission. Resources possess multiple meanings that can be viewed from multiple perspectives. Audiences can and should be encouraged to connect their perspectives to resource meanings that are most relevant and provoking to them. It is the diversity of resource meanings that provides the possibility of constituency building and a growing stewardship ethic. Audiences can disagree about the meanings of the resource but can agree the resource is worthy of care. Controversy indicates the presence of passion and the possibility of preservation.

Fortunately, controversy does not have to be difficult to interpret. When interpreters are prepared with comprehensive KR and KA and are able to apply foundational interpretive tools, models, and practices, the chaos that can come with controversy dissipates and the resource is best served.

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[i] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp

[ii] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp, Module 101: Fulfilling the NPS Mission and the Process of Interpretation, "An Interpretive Dialogue," "The Process Model"

[iii] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp, Module 101:Fulfilling the NPS Mission and the Process of Interpretation

[iv] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Module 340:Advanced Knowledge of the Resource

[v] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Module 340: Advanced Knowledge of the Audience

[vi] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Module 103: Themes, Goals, Objectives

[vii] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp**, "Process Model"

[viii] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Module 340:Connecting Multiple Resource Meanings to Multiple Audience Interests and Perspectives

[ix] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Interpreting Multiple Points of View

[x] Interpretive Development Program, National Park Service, **http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp** Interpreting Critical Resource Issues and Controversy